Copyright 1986 SOJOURNERS. Reprinted with permission from SOJOURNERS, December 1986 issue, Box 29272, Washington, D.C. 20017.

A Messenger Of God's Truth

In 1879, four years before Sojourner Truth died, a Louisville, Kentucky newspaper said of her, "The oldest truth nowadays is Sojourner." It was a tribute to both the seemingly boundless energy that still marked this remarkable woman's life as she entered her 83rd year, and to the fact that for decades she had traveled the country spreading the truth of the gospel.

Her early years as a slave had developed in Sojourner an intense passion for freedom, and she committed her life to the struggle to end human bondage. Seeing a vision of freedom for all as the only just goal, she argued vigorously against those who advocated postponing the fight for women's rights in favor of black rights, carrying in her own being proof that the issues could not be separated. Her voice rang out from one end of the country to the other in a call for women's suffrage and an end to slavery.

She relied on God's provision and the hospitality of strangers as she carried her message. She talked with authors and abolitionists, preachers and presidents. But most of all, she talked with God, with whom she had an unending conversation that began when she was a child and who was her source of guidance on every step of her journey.

Sojourner remained illiterate and once said of herself, "I can't read a book, but I can read the people." Indeed her understanding of human nature was profound, and she possessed a combination of fiery wit and gentle wisdom that had an effect on all who met her.

She not only agitated for the political rights of her people, she gave herself in service to their needs. When thousands of freed slaves left the South in the 1860s, she devoted her energies to those who fled to Washington, D.C. Crowded into squalid shanties, with no hope for education or employment, the freed slaves were discarded and forgotten by the society they had served. But Sojourner, then in her 70s, gave herself to every need.

An admirer of her said at that time:

When we follow her from one field of labor to another, her time being divided between teaching, preaching, nursing, watching, and praying, ever ready to counsel, comfort, and assist, we feel that, for one who is nobody but a woman, an unlettered woman, a black woman, and an old woman, a woman born and bred a slave, nothing short of the Divine incarnated in the human could have wrought out such grand results.

Clearly her society expected nothing much from this woman of such humble circumstances. But by her faithfulness, she was anointed a messenger of God's truth and became one of the finest bearers of Christ's love.

Linda DeGraf

SOJOURNER TRUTH WAS the unanimous choice of the *Sojourners* staff for this year's December incarnation issue, keeping our annual Christmas tradition of focusing on a person who incarnates Christ's love. In addition to being namesakes, we share the desire to be on a journey of faithfulness to Christ that advocates justice and freedom and bears fruit in service to others. Sojourner strides before us as a shining example.

She walked the same streets that Sojourners Community now inhabits in inner-city Washington, D.C. More than a hundred years ago, she gazed at the resplendent dome of the Capitol building and cried out in anguish about what we now call the "two Washingtons"—the powerful and prestigious one downtown and the powerless and poor one just a mile away.

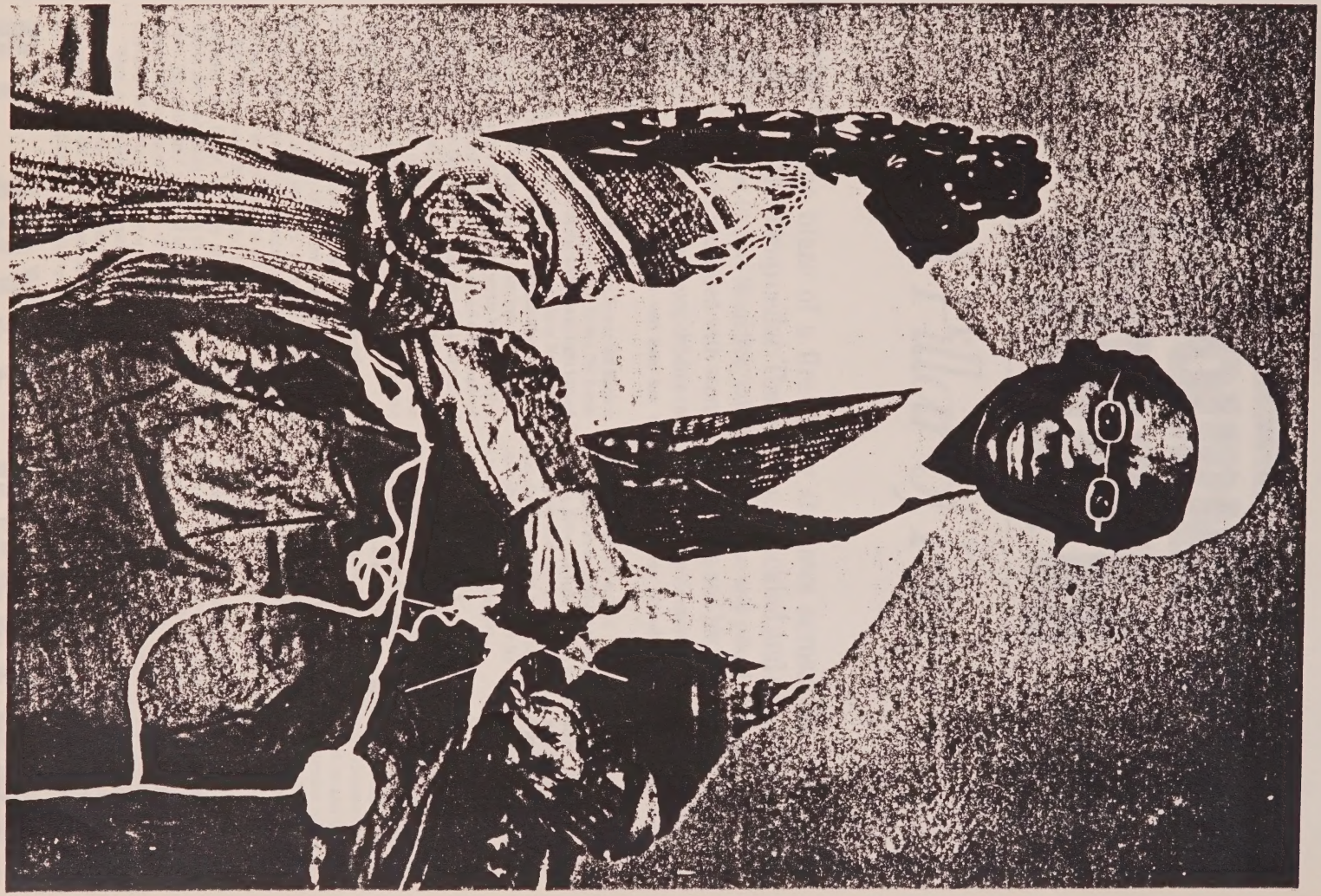
While she was here, she helped to organize resistance to raiders from Maryland who crossed into the capital city and kidnaped the children of freed slaves. On one occasion she encouraged three mothers to turn to the law to get their children back, and the enraged kidnapers threatened to throw her in jail. "If you do," she said to them, "I will make the United States rock like a cradle."

Her promise is an appropriate image for her life. It brings to mind the gentle arm of a loving mother at the cradle and, at the same time, a country rocking from top to bottom, both angered and swayed by the powerful passion of a fiery woman.

The work that Sojourner began continues still in the fight for justice. In this struggle we are being upheld by the strong and compassionate arm of a faithful woman who showed the way. And the country is still rocking. May we have as much determination and courage as our dear sister, Sojourner Truth.

—Joyce Hollyday

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026 with funding from
CLIR DHC Grant 2026-2028

https://archive.org/details/2174.16.04

SOJOURNER TRUTH

A Pillar of Fire

The blaze of a fire threw shadows across the walls of the damp cellar. The pine logs crackled and sputtered, and from time to time Baumfree, tall and gaunt, rose and poked at them.

The night was filled with stories, as Baumfree and his wife, Mau Mau Bett, recounted to their two young children the events they had witnessed. Mau Mau, a mother who had seen 10 of her children sold from her, wept as she told how Michel and Nancy had been taken away.

One snowy winter morning, 5-year-old Michel had heard bells outside and ran excitedly to see the horse and sleigh that had stopped by the door. His delight turned to horror as he saw a man take his little sister Nancy and shut her in the sleigh. He ran screaming into the cellar and tried to hide, but the slave traders soon had him as well.

Such stories must have convulsed young Isabella with a sense of dread as she listened and watched eerie shadows dance on the walls. She would one day rise to the stature of her father, whose well-chosen Dutch name meant "straight as a tree," but as a child she was small and thin. And she had learned at an early age that there is no security for the children of slaves.

The world that her owner, Charles Hardenbergh of New York, gave to her was limited to this dank cellar beneath his tavern. Loose boards thrown over oozing mud served as the floor of the slave quarters. Here men, women, and children slept crowded on pallets of straw and tried to fight off rheumatism, fever sores, and palsy.

But Mau Mau Bett expanded the world of her young daughter and Peter, her only remaining son. On clear nights she took them outside to sit beneath a canopy of stars. "My children," she told them, "there is a God who hears and sees everything you think and do." Isabella was overtaken with this great mystery.

"When you are beaten or cruelly treated, or you fall into any kind of trouble," her mother continued, "you must ask his help. He will always hear you and help you." Then they knelt together as she led the children in the Lord's Prayer, spoken in a Dutch dialect.

As surely as the fireside stories blazed fear in the soul of Isabella, these starlight lessons kindled in her the warmth of comfort and the mystery of faith. It was these lessons that she carried with her as she traveled from slavery on a path that led her to embrace the name Sojourner Truth and a vocation as God's pilgrim.

ISABELLA'S ACCEPTANCE OF God's mercy and comfort was put to its first severe test in 1806, when she turned 9. In that year Charles Hardenbergh died, leaving his relatives to decide the fate of his slaves. Baumfree, now a bent, old tree, was losing his sight and beginning to suffer the crippling effects of rheumatism. No one wanted the liability of Baumfree, so he and Mau Mau Bett were given their freedom and permission to live out their years in the cellar. Such "generosity" was in fact a way for the Hardenberghs to shirk responsibility for a failing couple that had given them the best years of their lives.

Mau Mau Bett's greatest fear came true on the auction block at the Hardenbergh estate: Both Isabella and Peter were sold away. Isabella was sold to John Nealy of Ulster County, New York, for a paltry $100. It has been conjectured that her "thin and bony" frame, or her "lack of feminine charm," were the reasons for the low price. One report has it that a few sheep were thrown in with her to make the deal more palatable to her new owner.

Isabella spoke no English, and her Dutch jargon was

BY JOYCE HOLLYDAY

SOJOURNER TRUTH WAS A BY THE SEARING, WHITE HE PASSION BY THE TEMPERI

incomprehensible to her new owners. Their instructions left her confused, and if ordered to bring a teaspoon, she would as likely return with a bucket or dishpan. She was cruelly treated, forced to walk in winter without shoes and made victim of various abuses and indignities.

One Sunday morning Isabella was instructed to go to the barn. There Nealy was waiting for her. He tied her hands together and whipped her with a bundle of rods until deep gashes were cut into her flesh and blood streamed from her wounds.

The scars from her beating stayed with her forever, burned into her flesh by the hatred of a white man toward a 10-year-old girl. These, too, she carried on every step along her journey.

WHILE SHE WAS NEALY'S slave, remembering her mother's comforting words under the stars, Isabella began to talk in earnest with God. She asked God to protect her from her persecutors. As the abuse grew worse, she pleaded with God to tell her what she was doing against God's will to bring such tragedy upon herself.

Before long, she knew that her only true prayer could be one for deliverance from the Nealys. She begged God to send to her her father, whom she believed could be the vehicle of her deliverance. A short while later, Baumfree limped through deep snow to her door and heard her daughter's plea.

Not long after, Martin Scriver from Kingston, New York, came to the Nealy estate and bought Isabella for $105. Scriver was a fisherman and tavern owner. He and his family were simple and honest people. Isabella thrived and grew strong in the midst of their boisterous life, unloading boats at the wharf, hauling herbs and roots for the tavern's liquors. While with the Scrivers, she acquired the habit of smoking a pipe and a brand of English that immediately identified her with a boat crew.

At 13 years old, Isabella had been transformed from a shy and frightened young girl into a tall and proud young woman. John Dumont, a nearby plantation owner, felt there was something striking about her and bargained with Scriver to buy her for $300.

Dumont was a kind man, and Isabella, known in the Dumont household as "Bell," soon became his favorite slave. He considered her "better than a man" because she could do as much as half a dozen others in the fields and still do the laundry at night. She soon incurred the envy and ire of the other slaves, Mrs. Dumont, and a white house servant named Kate, who took to throwing ashes in the potatoes Isabella washed every morning and then hurling vicious rebukes about the "dingy potatoes" her way.

While Isabella was with the Dumonts, Mau Mau Bett became very ill with palsy and a fever sore in one of her limbs. Baumfree returned from some chores one day and found her dead in the damp cellar—dead from sickness, toil, and unending grief over the loss of her last children.

Baumfree never stopped weeping. The last time Isabella saw him, he was sitting alone on a rock by the side of a road, disoriented, almost blind. Isabella tried to encourage him, informing him that the state of New York had agreed that in 10 years all slaves would be freed, and then she could come and care for him.

"But my child, I cannot live that long," he answered to her young enthusiasm.

A few years later, Isabella, carrying her infant daughter, walked the 12 miles from the Dumont estate to the old cellar to give Baumfree the opportunity to hold—if not see—his grandchild. But the Hardenberghs had moved him out, and Isabella could not find him. Baumfree was discovered frozen to death in a miserable shack a short while later.

AS A YOUNG WOMAN, Isabella never questioned the master-slave relationship, believing it to be God-ordained and trying her best, as her mother had taught her, to be an honest and obedient slave. She in fact related to God and John Dumont in much the same way—as powerful men who recorded every move she made and meted out punishments and rewards.

Isabella made herself a "sanctuary" among some willow trees and daily continued the conversation she had begun with God years earlier. She always began with the Lord's Prayer, chanted in the Dutch her mother had taught her. Then she went on to recount her sins and sufferings to God, begging for forgiveness at times, commanding God to set things straight at others. She questioned and cajoled and bargained with her Lord.

She grew to love a slave named Robert on the neighboring Catlin estate, and the two desired to be married. Recognizing that if they would marry, all offspring would be added to Dumont's estate, Catlin tried to force them apart. Undaunted, Robert came to visit Isabella clandestinely. He was discovered one afternoon at the Dumont estate by Catlin and his son, who beat Robert with sticks until his head and face were pulpy, then dragged him bleeding home. Robert was later forced to marry a woman on the Catlin estate. The tragic series of events, in which Isabella felt completely powerless, struck a deep blow to her faith in the slavery system.

Isabella was given in marriage to a slave named Thomas. She gave birth to five children.

Since the day that she had informed Baumfree that all slaves in New York state would be freed, Isabella longed for July 4, 1827 to arrive. As the years crept by, Dumont even promised to free her a year earlier, since she had been such a faithful slave. But then Isabella contracted a disease in her hand that hampered her work, and Dumont withdrew this promise. Dumont's subterfuge dealt a further blow to Isabella's trust in this system that gave all power to white masters.

Isabella went to the highest tribunal and laid down the law. "Oh, God," she called out in the English dialect that would be her language from then on, "I been a-askin' you, an' askin' you, an' askin' you, for all this long time to make my massa and missis better, an' you don't do it; an' what *can* be the reason? ...Well, now, I tell you, I'll make a bargain with you. Ef you'll help me to git away from my massa an' missis, I'll agree to be good; but ef you don't help me, I really don't think I can be."

She knew she couldn't see well enough to escape safely in the dark, but she feared getting caught if she left in the daylight. She handed this dilemma over to God and waited for a response. She got her answer: "Get up two or three hours before daylight, and start off."

"Thank you, Lord," she replied. "That's a good idea."

ONE FALL MORNING, at about three o'clock, Isabella arose, put a few articles of clothing and food into a big cotton handkerchief, gathered up her infant daughter, Sophia, and set off. By the time the bright autumn sun crested the horizon, she had reached the summit of a hill a considerable distance from the Dumont estate. She looked down on the valley below her, brilliant with golden hues in the early-morning light, and felt both joy and alarm grip her. She was free.

She sat down for a moment to nurse her child, then knelt on the ground. "Well, Lord," she called out to the vast sky, "you started me out; now please show me where to go."

Isabella walked until late at night and came upon the home of a Quaker couple named Van Wagener, a house she later said had been shown to her in a dream. They ushered her into a spotless room with a tall, white bed. Never having slept in a bed before, she spent the night underneath it.

Dumont soon caught up to her. When she refused to go back with him, he threatened to take her child. The matter was resolved when Isaac Van Wagener, staunchly opposed to buying human beings, agreed to "buy the services" of Isabella and Sophia for the balance of the year.

SOMETIME TRUTH WAS A PASSION BY THE TEMPLE

Beaufort never stopped weeping. The last time Isabella saw him, he was sitting alone on a rock by the side of a road. Distraught, almost blind, Isabella tried to encourage him, informing him that the state of New York had agreed that in 10 years all slaves would be freed, and then she could come and care for him.

"But my child, I cannot live that long," he answered to her young enthusiasm.

A few years later, Isabella, carrying her infant daughter, walked the 12 miles from the Dumont estate to the old cellar to give Beaufort the opportunity to hold—if not see—his grandchild. But the Hardys, Isabella had moved him out, and Isabella could not find him. Somehow word discovered Peter to obtain a missionary's block a short while later.

AS A YOUNG WOMAN,

Isabella never questioned the master-slave relationship, believing it to be God-ordained and acting for best, as her mother had taught her, to be an honest and obedient slave. She in fact related to God and John Dumont in much the same way—as powerful men who received every measure she made and meted out punishments and rewards.

Isabella made herself a "sanctuary" among some willow trees and daily communed the conversation she had begun with God years earlier. She always began with the Lord's Prayer, claimed in her Dutch her mother had taught her. Then she went on to recount her sins and sufferings to God, begging for forgiveness at times, commanding God to set things straight at others. She questioned and cajoled and bargained with her Lord.

She grew to love a slave named Isabor on the neighboring Catlin estate, and the two desired to be married. Recognizing that if they would marry, all offspring would be added to Dumont's estate, Catlin tried to force them apart. Unbeknownst, Isabor came to visit Isabella clandestinely. He was discovered one afternoon at the Dumont estate by Catlin and his son, who beat Isabor with sticks until his head and face were bloody, then dragged him bleeding home. Isabor was later forced to marry a woman on the Catlin estate. The tragic series of events, in which Isabella felt completely powerless, struck a deep blow to her faith in the slavery system.

Isabella was given in marriage to a slave named Thomas. She gave birth to five children.

Since the day that she had informed Beaufort that all slaves in New York state would be freed, Isabella longed for July 4,

LACK WOMAN MADE STEEL T OF SLAVERY, MADE COM- FIRE OF GOD'S LOVE.

The Van Wageners were staid Quaker folk. Their life held no excesses of either pain or pleasure. Isabella's roving spirit found life there too placid, and after several months another visit by John Dumont tempted her to return with him.

As Isabella started to climb into his carriage, she had an experience she described later in her *Narrative*:

Well, jest as I was goin' out to get into the wagon, I met God! *an' says I, "O God, I didn't know as you was so great!" An' I turned right round an' come into the house....*

I could feel [God] burnin', burnin', burnin' all around me, an' goin' through me; an' I saw I was so wicked, it seemed as if it would burn me up. An' I said, "O somebody, somebody, stand between God an' me! for it burns me!"

Then...I felt as it were somethin' like an umbrella that came between me an' the light, an' I felt it was somebody*....I begun to feel 'twas somebody that loved me....And finally somethin' spoke out in me an' said,* "This is Jesus!"*...An' then the whole world grew bright....An' I begun to feel sech a love in my soul as I never felt before....*

An' then, all of a sudden, it stopped, an' I said, "Dar's de white folks that have abused you, an' beat you, an' abused your people—think o' them!" But then there came another rush of love through my soul, an' I cried out loud—"Lord, Lord, I can love even de white folks!"

TRULY ISABELLA'S FIRST encounter with Jesus was dramatic, showering her with the forgiveness that only Jesus can offer and inviting her to a love so profound that she was able to forgive even her white persecutors. As the years unfolded, she was challenged to return to that forgiveness again and again.

Her immediate desire was to get back her children. She discovered that Peter, age 5, had been illegally sold to a wealthy Alabama planter named Fowler. She determined to take on a whole class of society and an entire state, if necessary, to get her son back.

Isabella became the butt of scorn and contempt as she tried to find help among whites. Mrs. Dumont told her to stop making such a fuss over a "paltry nigger."

But the Quakers sent Isabella to the New York grand jury in Kingston to register her complaint. This former slave woman, barefoot and dressed in a plain cotton dress, with a large colored kerchief on her head, marched into the courthouse. Walking right up to a man she described later as "the grandest lookin' one I could see," she asked, "Sir, be you a grand jury?"

In the end, Isabella triumphed. Not only did she succeed in getting a white slaveowner arrested, he was made to post $600 for his court appearance. In 1828 a black woman taking a white man to court and winning was unheard of.

And she got her son back. At first young Peter, still in the custody of his owner, denied ever knowing his mother and begged the court officials not to take him from his master, blaming the scars and bruises on his face on Fowler's horse. But once out of his owner's brutal grasp, he tearfully told his mother about the kicks and beatings that left bruises and welts all over his small body. When she moaned for his pain, Peter said, "Oh, this is nothing, mammy, you should see Phillis....She had a little baby, too, but Fowler cut her till the milk and blood ran down her body. You would certainly scare to see Phillis, mammy."

In her anguish Isabella cried out,"O Lord, render unto them double for all this!"

IN 1829 ISABELLA MOVED to New York City. There she joined the Zion African Church. During a service she knelt in prayer and extended her hand to the woman who prayed beside her. There was something familiar in the woman's bony hand, and yet Isabella could not explain the strange sense of intimacy she felt with her.

A short while later, Isabella's sister Sophia came to New York and announced that their brother Michel was also in the city. Isabella remembered Mau Mau Bett's numerous recountings of Michel and the sleigh and could not believe that they would be reunited.

The reunion was a joyful one, though tinged with a note of sorrow. "If only you had come a little sooner," Michel said to Isabella. "Nancy, who was shut up with me in the sleigh, died a few months ago." As Michel described her dress and appearance, he added that she attended Zion African Church.

Recognition dawned on Isabella's face. "I have seen my sister Nancy; and now I see that she looked *so* like Mau Mau." The brother and two sisters quietly wept together for all that had been lost. "Oh, Lord," cried Isabella, "what is this slavery, that it can do such dreadful things? What evil can it not do?"

Isabella's fervent zeal for following God's will and attraction to things mystical made her vulnerable to an experiment in religious fanaticism of a type that flourished in the 1830s. She had begun working at Magdalene House, a refuge for women off New York's streets. There she met Elijah and Sarah Pierson, and through them a man who called himself Matthias.

Matthias believed that he had been sent by God to convert the world and establish a "kingdom." Isabella and the Piersons were among those who turned over their possessions and joined Matthias.

The group's activity grew increasingly bizarre, and though Isabella remained apart from some of its more sordid aspects, she was eventually accused along with Matthias of poisoning Elijah Pierson. Isabella collected character references from

eight people who had known her, including a glowing testimony from John Dumont. In the end, the all-white jury not only acquitted her but also awarded her $125 in damages for any suffering her character might have undergone throughout the ordeal.

Isabella soon acquired employment with a wealthy New York family, the Whitings. But she grew increasingly uncomfortable with New York's corruption and vice, saying of the city, "Truly, here the rich rob the poor, and the poor rob one another."

She felt a call to take her message about Jesus to other parts of the land. On a summer morning in 1843, Isabella placed a few articles of clothing in a pillowcase and announced to the Whitings that the Lord was going to give her a new home. "Farewell, friends," she said as she left. "I must be about my Father's business." God's pilgrim was on the move again.

With only the sun to guide her and a quarter for the ferry to Brooklyn, she headed east. This pilgrimage felt to her like a break from all that had been before, and she wanted to leave everything behind, including her name. Every time she had been sold, her last name was changed to that of her master, and now she wanted a permanent name fitting of her calling.

As she was walking, the name Sojourner came to her, because she planned to "travel up and down the land" and be "a sign to the people." She prayed to God for a last name, and then exclaimed, "Thou art my last master, and thy name is Truth; and Truth shall be my abiding name till I die!"

THE GOD WHO HAD ONCE come upon her like a burning tempest now led her like the pillar of fire that went before the Israelites. She received hospitality from rich and poor alike and soon became recognized across the land as the tall, thin woman dressed in gray with mist-filled eyes and the love of Jesus in her heart.

She had a low voice that rang out when she sang and shook the gates of heaven when she preached. She could not read the Bible, and she often said that she preached from only one text: "When I found Jesus." Though she never learned to read or mastered English beyond a crude dialect, people of the highest intellect and education were swayed by her powerful message. Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* said of her, "I do not recollect...anyone who had more of that silent and subtle power which we call personal presence than this woman."

Her wanderings took her through Connecticut and into Massachusetts, where she settled for a time in the town of Northampton. There she encountered several noted abolitionists, including William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Wendell Phillips, who counted her among their company and affectionately called her "Aunty Sojourner."

It was in Northampton that Sojourner received her baptism by fire when a camp meeting was disrupted by a gang of ruffians. Mustering all her courage, she talked and sang the violent crowd into tranquility (see "Like Oil on Agitated Waters," page 26).

In this decade before the Civil War, the country was seething with unrest. Slavery was being hotly debated in all quarters. Women's rights were being pushed onto center stage, as the abolitionists and suffragists combined forces to set a social agenda for the nation.

Freedom burned in the soul of Sojourner Truth, and she added her voice to those of the advocates of equality for blacks and women. She was a black woman made steel by the searing, white heat of slavery, made compassion by the tempering fire of Christ's love. She was possessor of both a warm heart and a tongue of fire.

Victim of the slaveowner's lash in her early years, she now became the target of lashes of the tongue from her many opponents. At an 1852 women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio, her presence brought scorn from the men—many of them clergy—who had come to argue vigorously against the issue, and from the women, who feared that their cause might be undermined if it were perceived to be sympathetic to the abolitionist struggle. Amid hisses and jeers, Sojourner rose proudly and delivered her now famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech (see "Ain't I a Woman?" page 23).

At a gathering in a United Brethren meeting house in Indiana, a local physician, Dr. T.W. Strain, attempted to stop Sojourner from speaking by accusing her of being a man. He demanded that "for the speaker's own benefit" she submit herself to the inspection of some of the women present.

Furious debate ensued between those who were outraged at the proposed indignity and those who considered it a good idea. Strain, asserting that Sojourner's low voice was surely that of a man, called for a vote, in which an overwhelming chorus of "ayes" voted Sojourner into the male sex.

Amid the tumult, Sojourner rose and spoke with fiery indignation to her tormentors.

"My breasts has suckled many a white baby when dey shoulda been sucklin' my own," she said, adding that many of these babies had in her estimation grown to be far more manly than her persecutors. "I dar'st show my breasts to de whole cong'agation. It ain't to my shame dat I do dis, but yourn. Here den," she shouted as she opened her dress from collar to waist, "see fer yourself!" Her blazing gaze found Dr. Strain in the audience, as she fired her parting thrust, "Mought be you'd like to suck, too?"

Sojourner was always ready with a quick retort for any detractor. A meeting in Indiana in which the noted abolitionist Parker Pillsbury was the featured speaker was overtaken by a violent thunderstorm. A pro-slavery Methodist in the crowd used the interruption as an occasion to state to the gathering, "I am alarmed. I feel as if God's judgment is about to fall upon me for daring to sit and hear such blasphemy." And then the low voice of a woman shouted over the noise of the thunder and rain, "Chile, don't be skeered; you are not going to be harmed. I don't 'spec God's ever heard tell of ye!"

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 criminalized escape from slavery and opened the way for more violence against blacks. In response, militancy increased among the abolitionists. Despairing that their speeches and petitions would ever bring emancipation of the slaves, many began to see armed resistance as the only recourse.

Frederick Douglass began to espouse this point of view. Sojourner Truth was present in the audience one day when he recounted the terrible wrongs done to his people and asserted, "Slavery can only end in blood." Waves of despair swept over the large crowd until Sojourner's voice rang out and charged the throng with hope. She admonished Douglass with one simple question: "Frederick, is God dead?"

DIVISIONS BEGAN TO plague the abolition and suffrage movement. A major split occurred between those who felt that universal suffrage was the only just goal and those who believed that it was important to first secure the enfranchisement of blacks (meaning black men) and later of women. Sojourner grieved the prevailing decision to take the latter course, only too aware that black women performed the same arduous work under slavery as men and suffered the same cruelties, along with additional horror of sexual abuse.

At an 1867 equal rights convention in New York, Sojourner said about the fight for women's suffrage, "I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again." Her words turned out to be prophetic: Once the issue of women's suffrage was set aside in the 19th century, several decades passed before the question was forced again into public consciousness.

Sojourner was outspoken on other issues pertaining to women, especially fashion. She asserted to a group of women in Providence, Rhode Island, that if they had remembered that they are the "mothers of creation," they would not "rig [themselves] up" in wide skirts, high-heeled shoes, and "humps on their heads, and put them on their babies, and stuff them out so they keel over when the wind blows."

She was once asked her opinion of bloomers. "You see," she explained, "dey used to weave what dey called nigger-cloth, an' each one of us got jes' sech a strip, an' had to wear it width-wise. Them that was short got along pretty well, but as for me"—she gave a droll glance at her long limbs—"Tell *you,* I had enough of bloomers in them days."

As she wandered the country, Sojourner's direct and persistent proclamations of truth about slavery and the rights of women created a huge throng of friends who deeply loved her and an equally large number of foes, who marshaled all their hatred and unleashed it her way. She was beaten with clubs and pelted with stones, and on one occasion she received a wound that later led to an ulcerated leg.

In Angola, Indiana, persecutors threatened to burn down a hall where she was scheduled to speak. Sojourner's presence created such a stir of hatred that her supporters feared for her life. They decided to dress her in military regalia in the hopes of putting the "fear of God" into her opponents. Sojourner described the experience in her *Narrative*:

They put upon me a red, white, and blue shawl, a sash and apron to match, a cap on my head with a star in front, and a star on each shoulder. When I was dressed I looked in the glass and was fairly frightened....

My friends advised me to take a sword or pistol. I replied, "I carry no weapon; the Lord will preserve me without weapons. I feel safe even in the midst of my enemies; for the truth is powerful and will prevail."

Sojourner was placed in a carriage, surrounded by soldiers, and followed by a long procession. A huge, hostile crowd was waiting outside the hall where she was to speak, but as the long contingent arrived the throng dispersed "like a flock of frightened crows." She described the evening this way: "The band struck up the 'Star Spangled Banner,' in which I joined and sang with all my might, while amid flashing bayonets and waving banners our party made its way to the platform upon which I went and advocated free speech with more zeal than ever before, and without interruption."

Sojourner's stay in Angola culminated in her arrest. She explained her trial: "After a while, two half-drunken lawyers, who looked like the scrapings of the Democratic Party, made their appearance, eyed us for a few moments, then left. Presently we saw them enter a tavern across the way, and this ended the trial."

DURING THE CIVIL WAR, Sojourner settled for a time in Battle Creek, Michigan, attracted there by a spiritual community and the town's anti-slavery sentiment. Sojourner was now in her 60s. She was well-respected by the town's citizens and particularly loved by its children. They often gathered on her front porch and begged her to tell them stories, which she did between puffs on her white clay pipe.

She still had not learned to read. When a friend offered to teach her in her later years, she responded that her "brains [was] too stiff" to learn. In return for the stories she told them, the children read to her from the Bible. She preferred them as readers over adults, who seemed unable to resist interpreting the scriptures to her while reading.

She was rarely seen without her pipe. Some of her friends apparently criticized her habit. One reminded her that "the Bible tells us that 'no unclean thing can enter the kingdom of heaven' " and that nothing was filthier than the breath of a smoker. Her quick retort: "Yes, chile, but when I goes to heaven I 'spects to leave my breff behind me."

With so much brewing in the nation, Sojourner soon found it impossible to remain in Michigan. One morning in the spring of 1864, she announced to a friend that she was leaving for Washington that afternoon. She was now close to 70 years old and recovering from an illness. In response to her friend's "Whatever for?" Sojourner replied, "I'm going down there to advise the president."

Her friends protested that he was too busy and she was too old. But in words that could stand as a summation of her life, she retorted, "I never determined to do anything and failed."

The meeting of the two tall, gaunt fighters for black emancipation was historic. President Abraham Lincoln confessed that he had heard of Sojourner long before she had heard of him. At the end of their visit, Sojourner brought out the book she carried with her at all times, her *Book of Life*, whose pages bore the signatures and good wishes of all the interesting people she met on her journey. To such names as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, William Lloyd Garrison, and Harriet Beecher Stowe was added the inscription of a president: "For Aunty Sojourner Truth, Oct. 29, 1864, A. Lincoln."

SHE HAD COME TO VISIT a president, but the misery Sojourner witnessed in Washington compelled her to stay. An area by the city's Grand Canal teemed with thousands of former slaves, who had rushed across the Mason-Dixon line and into the city after the Emancipation Proclamation, with no possessions except the freedom given them by a dash of Lincoln's pen. Known in the North as "contrabands," they crowded into dark hovels and shanties, living in a squalor that bred disease and crime.

Upon seeing the poverty, this woman who had spent much of her life among white people preaching and agitating felt God call her to remain with her own for a while. Like a whirlwind, Sojourner attacked the problems that she saw, offering counsel, teaching hygiene, nursing the sick, finding work for her people. Raiders from Maryland frequently crossed into the Washington slum and kidnapped children, and Sojourner became a leader in the resistance to such activity.

In other parts of the city, marble edifices that radiated power and wealth were taking shape. Sojourner passed by these buildings in her journeys around Washington. She often paused at the Capitol, she explained in her *Narrative*, to thank God that the stars and stripes flying over the dome no longer symbolized the "scars and stripes" on the backs of her people.

But one day, with the picture of the children from the slums in her mind, anguish and anger overtook her as she gazed at the white, resplendent dome built at the nation's expense. She cried out, "*We helped* to pay this cost!" Her mind recalled all the back-breaking and unrewarded work that had been endured by her people. She later paraphrased the thoughts that came to her that day:

...Beneath a burning southern sun have we toiled, in the canebrake and the rice swamp, urged on by the merciless driver's lash, earning [for him] millions of money; and so highly were we valued, that should one poor wretch venture to escape

SOJOURNER TRUTH

from this hell of slavery, no exertion of man or trained bloodhound was spared to seize and return him to his field of unrequited labor....Our nerves and sinews, our tears and blood, have been sacrificed on the altar of this nation's avarice....Some of its dividends must surely be ours.

JUSTICE BURNED IN Sojourner's soul now as passionately as freedom once had. She put her energy toward what she hoped would be the crowning achievement of her life—a land grant for blacks in the U.S. West. She understood fully that land ownership was the crux of the issue: Those who had plowed and planted the soil for generations would never be truly free until they could do so to their own benefit. Huge tracts of land were being given over to the development of a railway system, and Sojourner reasoned that surely people were as deserving as the railroads.

With her body now slightly bent and her voice a bit huskier, Sojourner earnestly poured out her last bit of fire as she resumed her travels across the country. She preached and beseeched her audiences to sign petitions on behalf of the land grant. But she misjudged the intransigence of white racism. With slavery no longer an issue, many whites had lost their interest in the black cause, and she faced large opposition to her plan.

At home she faced the hatred for her race in her attempts to get around Washington by streetcar. Just as she had taken on John Dumont and Dr. T.W. Strain, she took on Jim Crow. Always she found a way to turn her enemies' hatred to her own advantage.

In one incident Sojourner seated herself across from two white women. One of them called to the conductor, "Do niggers ride in these cars?...Tis a shame and a disgrace. They ought to have a nigger car on this track."

Sojourner immediately retorted, "Of course colored people ride in the cars. Streetcars are made for poor white and colored folks. Carriages are for ladies and gentlemen."

Another incident has been credited as the probable cause of a change in Jim Crow laws in Washington's streetcars. When Sojourner refused to be put out of a car, the conductor pushed her up against the door, dislocating her shoulder.

"I will let you know whether you can treat me like a dog," Sojourner fired at him, and then told a white friend with her to take the number of the car. Sojourner later had the conductor arrested and dismissed.

SOJOURNER CONTINUED THE arduous work of serving her people, while still journeying far and wide in an effort to secure their civil and political rights. She took up the cause of temperance and child labor, having seen firsthand the ravages of alcohol in the slums and the exploitation of children. She spoke against capital punishment and on behalf of equal pay for equal work, long before the concept became a platform in the women's movement.

She returned to Battle Creek around the time of the 1868 presidential election to campaign for Ulysses S. Grant. On the Saturday before the election, she boldly marched to the Board of Registration to enter her name on the voting rolls. Her request was denied. Undeterred, she appeared at the polls on election day and was again refused.

She acquired an interview in 1870 with President Grant, who added his name to her *Book of Life*. She also delivered a petition about the land grant to the U.S. Congress and received a standing ovation from the Senate for her relentless efforts for freedom.

Sojourner continued criss-crossing the country, gaining more names for her petition from her supporters and insults from her tormentors. The wear of age and a lifetime of traveling now began to show. "Everybody tells me to 'stir 'em up,' " she confided to a friend. "But I ask you, 'Why don't *they* stir 'em up?'—as though an old body like myself could do all the stirring." Yet she persisted in the belief that if only she could acquire enough signatures, her dream of a place in the West for her people would be realized. She continued to pour her waning energy into a dream that would never be fulfilled.

Sojourner contracted ulcers and fever sores of the type that had claimed the life of Mau Mau Bett. The physician who treated her leg ulcers recalled that he gave her some medicine and then checked on her six weeks later, only to discover that the sores had significantly worsened. "Well, doctor," Sojourner explained, "I thought those salves...you gave me were too mild for anyone as tough as I am, so I went to the horse doctor and he gave me something that was real strong...."

The art of skin grafting had recently been developed. But when a family member of Sojourner's was approached as a donor, she feared the doctor was proposing to "skin her alive." The doctor finally used patches of skin from his own arm to heal Sojourner and buy her another decade of life.

In her last years, when exhaustion and despair could easily have become temptations, Sojourner found instead a new vision. Too perceptive to ignore the facts, but too faithful to yield to cynicism, she found hope in a truth far greater than her plan for settling her people in the West. She had a grander vision than others even dared to dream. Listen to the words of a proud, old black woman with fire in her eyes, words that stand as prophecy:

These colored people will bring the whites out of Egyptian darkness into marvelous light. The white people cannot do it, but these will. They will teach the slaveholders the truth that they never had and never knew of....These colored people are going to be a people. Do you think God has had them robbed and scourged all the days of their life for nothing!

She found the faith to take the most difficult step of all on her long journey—the step of forgiving her white persecutors and envisioning their salvation. For Sojourner, this forgiveness became very personal in regard to John Dumont. A twist of fate brought an ironic conclusion to their relationship.

Sojourner had returned to visit her former owner and found him advanced in age and deprived of his wealth. He had changed his mind about slavery, now calling it the "greatest curse the earth had ever felt." Sojourner fervently praised God that she had lived to hear him utter those words.

She received a letter from her daughter a short time later, informing her that Dumont had moved West, taking along—probably by mistake—the few pieces of furniture she had left with him. "Never mind," said Sojourner. "What we give to the poor, we lend to the Lord."

SOJOURNER'S HEALTH continued to fail, and her ulcerous limbs left her in great pain. As the end came close and the suffering grew almost unbearable, she sang—often the same hymn, her favorite, that had quieted the Northampton mob:

It was early in the morning
...Just at the break of day
When he rose
...And went to heaven in a cloud.

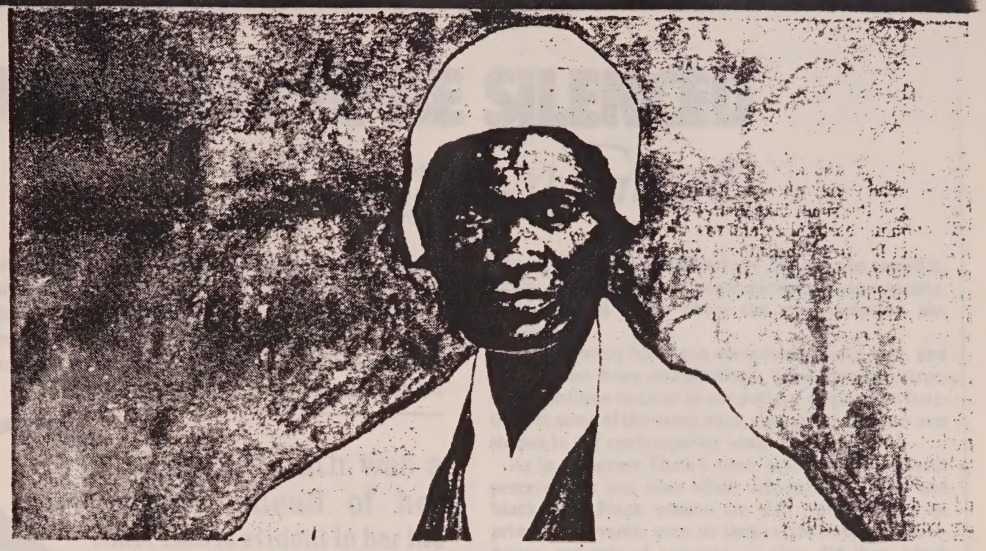
Friends who were with her near the end talked about a remarkable serenity that enveloped her.

Sojourner Truth died at three o'clock in the morning on November 26, 1883. A few days earlier, a sorrowful friend had come to comfort her. "I'm not going to die, honey," Sojourner reassured her. "I'm going home like a shooting star." No doubt she shot straight to heaven and resumed her conversation with God where they left off.

A long line of carriages and a huge throng followed the hearse with its sombre black plumes to Oak Hill Cemetery in Battle Creek. A stone was later placed on her grave, bearing her faithful proclamation and celebrated admonition to Frederick Douglass, "Is God Dead?" A witness reported that as her body was lowered into the ground, the sun appeared like a blaze of fire on the western horizon.

Sojourner Truth has been laid to rest but the ground cannot contain this faithful wanderer. She moves like God's fiery pillar before us. She has blazed a trail for freedom and justice. And she beckons us, in courage and in faith, to follow.

A WOMAN OF FAITH AND FIRE



'SHE SMILES WITHIN MY SMILE' by Alice Walker

There are always people in history (or herstory) who help us, and whose "job" it is, in fact, to do this. One way of looking at history (whether oral or written) is as a method that records characteristics and vibrations of our helpers, whose spirits we may feel but of whose objective reality as people who once lived we may not know. Now these people—our "spirit helpers," as indigenous peoples time after time in all cultures have referred to them—always create opportunities that make a meeting with and recognition of them unavoidable.

Sojourner Truth is one such figure for me. Even laying aside such obvious resemblances as the fact that we are both as concerned about the rights of women as the rights of men, and that we share a certain "mystical" bent, Sojourner ("Walker"—in the sense of traveler, journeyer, wanderer) Truth (which "Alice" means in Old Greek) is also my name. How happy I was when I realized this. It is one of those "synchronicities" (some might say conceits) of such reassuring proportions that, even when I've been tempted to rename myself "Treeflower" or "Weed," I have resisted.

I get a power from this name that Sojourner Truth and I share. And when I walk into a room of strangers who are hostile to the words of women, I do so with her/our cloak of authority—as black women and beloved expressions of the universe (i.e. children of God)—warm about me.

She smiles within my smile. That irrepressible great heart rises in my chest. Every experience that roused her passion against injustice in her lifetime shines from my eyes.

This feeling of being loved and supported by the universe in general and by certain recognizable spirits in particular is bliss. No other state is remotely like it. And perhaps that is what Jesus tried so hard to teach: that the transformation required of us is not simply to be "like" Christ, but to *be* Christ.

The spirit of our helpers incarnates in us, making us more ourselves by extending us far beyond. And to that spirit there is no "beginning" as we know it (although we might finally "know" a historical figure who at one time expressed it) and no end. Always a hello, from the concerned spiritual ancestor you may not even have known you had—but this could strike at any time. Never a goodbye. ■

Alice Walker is a writer and poet. She is the author of the Pulitzer prize-winning book The Color Purple *(1982) and most recently of* Horses Make a Landscape More Beautiful: Poems *(1984), both published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.*

Linda DeGraf

A REFUSAL TO BE SILENCED

by Jacquelyn Grant

A WOMAN OF FAITH AND FIRE

To white women and men, Sojourner Truth raised up the dualism perpetuated in the society's conception of womanhood. More than anyone else, she pointed to the radical differences between the lives of white women and black women. Black women were certainly not accorded the privileges and protections that white women enjoyed.

Sojourner rhetorically asked, "Ain't I a woman?" In this same vein, recognizing that "Negro suffrage" meant black male suffrage, one could say that she was also asking, "Ain't I black?" In other words, Sojourner Truth did what few people were doing—she raised her voice in behalf of black women. It was Sojourner Truth's experience as a black woman that gave her the insight to be broad in her analysis yet concrete at the same time. The complex nature of black women's reality demanded this kind of approach, and it still does.

BLACK WOMEN TODAY WOULD DO well to build upon what Sojourner Truth started in the struggle for black women's liberation. But Sojourner Truth offers an additional challenge for a very specialized group of people—black women in ministry. Though not an ordained minister, she considered herself a preacher—a preacher who, at her commissioning, was given a name indicative of her calling.

God gave her the name "Sojourner" because she was to travel "up an' down the land showin' the people their sins and bein' a sign unto them"; and "Truth" because she was to speak the truth to the people. Having been so commissioned, Sojourner Truth moved about preaching her favorite sermon, which was not mere pietistic rhetoric but an account of her life from the time of her parents' enslavement to the time of her own encounter with Jesus, the one who heard her cries even when no one else would or could.

It was quite clear that Sojourner's social and political justice activities were not for personal gain but attempts to reorder the society so that it might better reflect the will of God. On one occasion, when Frederick Douglass ended a speech in dismay, Sojourner rose and exclaimed, "Frederick, is God dead?" As long as there is God, believed Sojourner, there is hope and assurance for God's people.

Sojourner Truth provided a challenge for black women in general and black women in ministry in particular. To black women she says we must look at black women's reality wholistically. Racism, sexism, and classism cannot be radically separated, but they all must be dealt with as interrelated structures of oppression. Likewise, to black women in ministry, the challenge is that a call from God is one not to a false notion of pietistic spirituality but toward wholistic liberation.

As a black woman theologian in the 20th century seeking to do theology which is meaningful to black women, I find the tradition that Sojourner Truth represents to be most significant in articulating the meaning of the Christian faith for black women—past, present and future. ■

Jacquelyn Grant is assistant professor of systematic theology at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

would have given some token of his will through the birth, life, and death of the Saviour."

"Look at what happened on account of Eve," pointed out a third preacher.

WOMAN'S RIGHTS WAS COMING in for a very hard time. The timid women folk were no match for the more experienced men. They by their arguments had drawn much applause as well as sneers and raillery against woman's rights from rough men and boys in the galleries. A complete rout was in prospect.

All this time Sojourner Truth had scarcely lifted her head. But this was mere pose. Never had her mind been more greatly agitated, her rage more vehemently stirred. If ever she prayed to her God it was during these hours; for the trick of the ministers of calling upon the name of the Deity to condone an injustice harked back too vividly to the tactics which the same clergy was employing in a cowardly defense of slavery.

For hours she had held her peace. Experience had bred a certain civility, and she would not ruthlessly trample in pastures where she had not been welcomed. But now she had heard more than she could stand. She was God's flaming messenger of Truth, and God simply would not endure a continuation of this maligning in His name!...Slowly she emerged from her half-hidden perch. A half dozen voices at once gasped into the chairman's ear, "Don't let her speak!"...

As Sojourner made her way to the platform, a hissing sound of disapproval rushed through the room....Unmindful and unafraid, the old black woman moved on, with slowness and solemnity, to the front. Then she laid her old bonnet at her feet and, fastening her great, speaking eyes upon the chairman, she sought permission to address the group.

Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place everywhere. Nobody eber helped me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or give me any best place! And ain't I a woman?

The chairman turns to the audience and announces with befitting simplicity, "Sojourner Truth has a word. I beg of you to listen for a few moments." With electrical rapidity the air cleared. The hubbub gave way to absolute silence....

Every eye fixes on the tall angular form. Her chin high, her eyes gleaming, yet seeming more a part of some faraway body than of that quiet poised person in whose head they shine, she stands for an instant and appraises her audience....

"Well, chillun," she began with that familiarity which came to her so readily, whether she was addressing God or man, "whar dar is so much racket, dar must be something out o' kilter. I t'ink dat 'twixt de niggers of de Souf an' de women at de Norf' all a-talkin' 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon.

"But what's all dis here talkin' about?"

A WOMAN OF FAITH AND FIRE

'THEN I WILL SPEAK UPON THE ASHES' *by Catherine Meeks*

When Sojourner Truth was informed that Indiana rebel sympathizers threatened to burn down the hall in which she was scheduled to hold a rally, she said, "Then I will speak upon the ashes."

It is in this tenacious manner that she confronted the difficult and often cruel realities of her life. She learned both from the verbal and the non-verbal messages of her mother that one must not be defeated by the injustice, cruelty, and evil of the world. Her mother, Mau Mau Bett, taught her to pray, to be tough-headed and tough-hearted.

These lessons stood the 9-year-old Isabella in good stead when she was sold away from her parents. The rumors told about her sale claim that her marketability resulted from the fact that she came with a flock of sheep. Regardless of the truth of this story, the fact is that she was bought for $100 by a storekeeper named John Nealy.

Because she spoke only the Low Dutch of her former master, she suffered in the English-speaking Nealy household from not being understood and from not understanding her work instructions. After two years of praying for a better place to live, she was bought for $105, and finally in 1810 she was bought for $300 by John J. Dumont. She was 13 years old. She lived with the Dumonts until gaining her freedom.

Because Sojourner Truth was born black and female, the culture in which she was forced to live intended for her to stand always in the ashes or not to stand at all. But her strength of character and heart set her about the task of transforming that prescription by defying its power to control her and to determine the path that her life could follow.

The image that is created by the words "Then I will speak upon the ashes" conveys the reality of the woman who at age 30 picked up her young child and walked off

She wheeled round in the direction of one of the previous speakers....

"Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place everywhere. Nobody eber helped *me* into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or give *me* any best place!"

She raised herself to her full height and in a voice as rumbling as thunder roared, "And ain't *I* a woman?"

A low murmur advanced through the crowd.

"Look at me," she continued. "Look at my arm."

She bared her right arm to the shoulder and dramatically demonstrated its great muscular power.

"I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns"—her voice was singing into the ether—"and no man could head me—and ain't *I* a woman?"

The murmur became more vocal.

"I have born'd five childrun and seen 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and ain't *I* a woman?"...

"Den dey talks 'bout dis t'ing in de head—what dis dey call it?"

"Intellect," whispers someone near by.

"Dat's it, honey—intellect. Now, what's dat got to do wit women's rights or niggers' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?"

Now the crowd...rocks the church with applause and cheers, and echoes its approval of her words by pointing scornful fingers at the minister whom a few minutes ago it had applauded for sentiments in exactly the opposite key.

"Den dat little man in black dar," she continued, referring to another minister, "he say women can't have as much rights as man, 'cause Christ warn't a woman. Whar did your Christ come from?" she thundered at him, her arms outstretched, her eyes shooting fire. This was a lightning thrust. The throng sat perfectly quiet.

Then, raising her voice as high as it was possible for her to do, she repeated the query.

"Whar did your Christ come from?"

She hesitated a moment, poised over the audience like a bird hovering just before a final swoop down upon its prey, then thundered, "From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him!"

The audience was overwhelmed. It could not endure so much logic and oratory at one time. Pandemonium broke loose.

But Sojourner was not quite through. She turned finally to the man who had made a deprecating gesture at Eve, and rebuked him.

"If de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down, all alone—dese togedder ought to be able to turn it back and get it rightside up again; and now dey is asking to do it, de men better let 'em."

Amidst deafening cheering and stamping, Sojourner Truth, who had arisen to catcalls and hisses, could hardly make herself heard as she shouted in conclusion, "Bleeged to ye for hearin' on me; and now ole Sojourner hain't got nothing more to say." ■

Excerpted from *Sojourner Truth: God's Faithful Pilgrim*, by Arthur Huff Fauset, published by University of North Carolina Press, 1938, and reissued by Russell & Russell, 1971.

the Dumont plantation to become Sojourner Truth. The first test came when she set out to find her son, Peter, who had been sold away from her. When she learned that he had been taken to Alabama, she confronted the legal system in her fight to get him returned to her. She won. Of course, she did not seem to realize how extraordinary it was for a black woman to take a white man to court in 1828 and win her case against him.

For Sojourner Truth the whole event was merely a matter of a woman of faith who had "right" on her side, fighting for what was her due and having God undergird that fight. Her entire life was undergirded by an unshakable faith that allowed her to turn to God in her words of prayer. She was known to begin most of her addresses with the phrase, "Children, I speak to God and God speaks to me...."

"THEN I WILL SPEAK UPON THE ASHES."

And, indeed, she did, whether she was confronting the ashes created by the pain of being sold away from her parents as a 9-year-old child, or watching her old, blind, and ill father die of exposure and starvation a few miles from the plantation that had taken the best years of his life but whose owners let him go in his old age because he was a liability.

Sojourner Truth spoke non-verbally as well as verbally to the ashes created by those voices of male criticism that attempted to negate her validity. In one instance men raised questions about her gender, while the white females, who knew that she was a woman, sat silently because of their physical and emotional ties to Sojourner's critics. Her response was to pull open the front of her dress to show her bare breasts in order to validate her femaleness.

The racism of the abolitionists, the sexism of the men, black and white, and the racism of the white women's-rights fighters were never enough to stop her. She knew that she had to stay focused upon the task before her and that she must not be stopped by hardship, cruelty, or fear.

AND WHY IS SHE IMPORTANT?

Of all that one can say about Sojourner Truth, the most profound fact about her life and story is her faith. It was a faith not rooted in some abstract, theological perception of God nor in some image of a puppet being manipulated by individual holiness and justification.

No, this God of hers is one who watches 9-year-old girls

Like Oil on Agitated Waters

When Sojourner had been at Northampton a few months, she attended [a] camp meeting at which she performed a very important part.

A party of wild young men, with no motive but that of entertaining themselves by annoying and injuring the feelings of others, had assembled at the meeting, hooting and yelling, and in various ways interrupting the services and causing much disturbance. Those who had the charge of the meeting, having tried their persuasive powers in vain, grew impatient and tried threatening.

The young men, considering themselves insulted, collected their friends, to the number of a hundred or more, dispersed themselves through the grounds, making the most frightful noises, and threatening to fire the tents. It was said the authorities of the meeting sat in grave consultation, decided to have the ring-leaders arrested, and sent for the constable, to the great displeasure of some of the company, who were opposed to such an appeal to force and arms....Sojourner, seeing great consternation depicted in every countenance, caught the contagion and found herself quaking with fear.

Under the impulse of this sudden emotion, she fled to the most retired corner of a tent and secreted herself behind a trunk, saying to herself, "I am the only colored person here and on me, probably, their wicked mischief will fall first, and perhaps fatally." But feeling how great was her insecurity even there, as the very tent began to shake from its foundations, she began to soliloquize as follows:

"Shall I run away and hide from the Devil? Me, a servant of the living God? Have I not faith enough to go out and quell that mob, when I know it is written—'One shall chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight'? I know there are not a thousand here; and I know I am a servant of the living God. I'll go to the rescue, and the Lord shall go with and protect me."

"Oh," said she, "I felt as if I had *three hearts!* and that they were so large, my body could hardly hold them!"

She now came forth from her hiding place and invited several to go with her and see what they could do to still the raging of the moral elements. They declined and considered her wild to think of it.

The meeting was in the open fields—the full moon shed its saddened light over all—and the woman who was that evening to address them was trembling on the preachers' stand. The noise and confusion were now terrific. Sojourner left the tent alone and unaided and, walking some thirty rods to the top of a small rise of ground, commenced to sing in her most fervent manner, with all the strength of her most powerful voice, the hymn on the resurrection of Christ:

It was early in the morning—it was early in the morning,
Just at the break of day—
When he rose—when he rose—when he rose,
And went to heaven on a cloud.

As she commenced to sing, the young men made a rush toward her, and she was immediately encircled by a dense body of the rioters, many of them armed with sticks or clubs as their weapons of defense, if not of attack. As the circle narrowed around her, she ceased singing and, after a short pause, inquired, in a gentle but firm tone, "Why do you come about me with clubs and sticks? I am not doing harm to any one."

"We ar'n't a going to hurt you, old woman; we came to hear you

A WOMAN OF FAITH AND FIRE

Because she was born black and female, her culture intended for her to stand always in the ashes or not to stand at all.

being sold into slavery from their parents for reasons that are clear only to God. Her God also meets her as a person in her personal, daily struggle as a slave and keeps her in a relationship that makes sense to her and offers her the courage to be.

Sojourner Truth holds up the beauty of mystery to those of us who are her biological and spiritual descendants. For there is no mystery greater than the reasons why Sojourner Truth should have hope and faith in the midst of the realities that confronted her throughout her life. It is in her embrace of the mystery of faith and hope that she confronts the forces that would negate the validity of her faith, her life, and her very personhood, in order to transform the negative and to give birth to the brightness of her spirit. Hers is a brightness that continues to shine into this last quarter of the 20th century, as blacks, whites, men, and women try to shape a life of sanity out of a history of insanity and unrelatedness.

Sojourner Truth's brightness of spirit stands at the base of every pile of "ashes" to beckon us forward. That brightness shines in the ashes of our despair over lost civil rights gains, confused feminist struggle, the threat of nuclear holocaust, the deterioration of black families, poverty, and all of the many other ills of this era. The six-foot-tall ex-slave and itinerant woman preacher, declaring that she will not allow her life's light to be determined by the darkness around her, encourages our journeys and calls us—if we find it necessary—to "speak upon the ashes." ■

Catherine Meeks, a Sojourners *contributing editor, is an instructor and director of Afro-American Studies at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia.*

sing," cried many voices, simultaneously.

"Sing to us, old woman," cries one. "Talk to us, old woman," says another. "Pray, old woman," says a third. "Tell us your experience," says a fourth.

"You stand and smoke so near me, I cannot sing or talk," she answered.

"Stand back," said several authoritative voices, with not the most gentle or courteous accompaniments, raising their rude weapons in the air. The crowd suddenly gave back, the circle became larger, as many voices again called for singing, talking, or praying, backed by assurances that no one should be allowed to hurt her—the speakers declaring with an oath, that they would "*knock down*" any person who should offer her the least indignity.

She looked about her and with her usual discrimination said inwardly, "Here must be many young men in all this assemblage, bearing within them hearts susceptible of good impressions. I will speak to them." She did speak; they silently heard and civilly asked her many questions. It seemed to her to be given her at the time to answer them with truth and wisdom beyond herself. Her speech had operated on the roused passions of the mob like oil on agitated waters; they were, as a whole, entirely subdued and only clamored when she ceased to speak or sing.

Those who stood in the background after the circle was enlarged cried out, "Sing aloud, old woman, we can't hear." Those who held the sceptre of power among them requested that she should make a pulpit of a neighboring wagon.

She said, "If I do, they'll overthrow it."

"No, they sha'n't—he who dares hurt you, we'll knock him down instantly," cried the chiefs.

"No we won't, no we won't, nobody shall hurt you," answered the many voices of the mob. They kindly assisted her to mount the wagon, from which she spoke and sung to them about an hour. Of all she said to them on the occasion, she remembers only the following:

"Well, there are two congregations on this ground. It is written that there shall be a separation, and the sheep shall be separated from the goats. The other preachers have the sheep, *I* have the goats. And I have a few sheep among my goats, but they are *very* ragged." This exordium produced great laughter.

When she became wearied with talking, she began to cast about her to contrive some way to induce them to disperse. While she paused, they loudly clamored for "more, more—sing, sing more." She motioned them to be quiet and called out to them, "Children, I have talked and sung to you, as you asked me; and now I have a request to make of you: Will you grant it?"

"Yes, yes, yes," resounded from every quarter.

"Well, it is this," she answered. "If I will sing one more hymn for you, will you then go away, and leave us this night in peace?"

"Yes, yes," came faintly, feebly from a few.

"I repeat it," says Sojourner, "and I want an answer from you all, as of one accord. If I will sing you one more, you will go away, and leave us this night in peace?"

"Yes, yes, yes," shouted many voices, with hearty emphasis.

"I repeat my request once more," said she, "and I want you *all* to answer." And she reiterated the words again.

This time a long, loud "Yes—yes—yes," came up, as from the multitudinous mouth of the entire mob.

"Amen! It is sealed," repeated Sojourner, in the deepest and most solemn tones of her powerful and sonorous voice. Its effect ran through the multitude, like an electric shock; and the most of them considered themselves bound by their promise, as they might have failed to do under less imposing circumstances. Some of them began instantly to leave; others said, "Are we not to have one more hymn?"

"Yes," answered their entertainer, and she commenced to sing:

I bless the Lord I've got my seal—to-day and to-day—
To slay Goliath in the field—to-day and to-day;
The good old way is a righteous way,
I mean to take the kingdom in the good old way.

■

Excerpted from *Narrative of Sojourner Truth and Book of Life*, by Olive Gilbert (Arno Press and the *New York Times*, 1968). This material is in the public domain.